

YOUNG LEIF

Part 4: The Australian

By

Joe Fisher

Young Leif

Part 4: The Australian.

OUTSIDE OF A BIG PARTY, BERTBERT LEAVES A MESSAGE FOR LEIF.

BERTBERT

(Party in the background.)

Leif! How's my favorite Earthling other than Denzel Washington!? I'm back home on Sigius because it is Vargan Day, "Litos Vargans" to YOU my friend. You don't know what Vargan day is, which is great because I get to explain it to you now. Settle in, cupcake... I'm using that word right, right? Cupcake. I mean I know it's a tiny cake but you also call people that, right? Like, in a condescending way?... Pretty sure I'm right about that, anyway, now I want cake, anyway... VARGAN DAY, Leif. Three intrepid souls many many years ago: Therin Jonger, Eliak Seers, and Lowan Regan. Remember those names. At the dawning of the Original Coalition they left the planet on a ship called The Vargan. It was the first mission of its kind. An open ended one. They were to set out into Andromeda and send back data on the wider universe and keep doing so until they exhausted all their resources... They never returned. No one knows why but since space is always trying to kill you the assumption is that it was some sort of space thing. You may be saying to yourself "Why are they celebrating a failed mission?" Well I'll tell you why... The planets of the original coalition first made contact hundreds of years ago. They had never met each other but, using some sort of process that involved quantum entanglement they figured out how to communicate. They all worked together to build the Vargan. Urt provided the ships AI, Garrion provided the interior systems, Greedon and Septsu provided stellar cartography, and Vapus designed the engine. And the whole thing was built right here on Sigius. For a while there it looked like the galaxy was about to open up into a golden age of cooperation and exploration... and then along came the fucking Teds. So we celebrate it as a moment of greatness in our history but then also there's this undercurrent of sadness to the whole thing. Because of what could've been... This is BertBert, by the way. Ha! Talk to you later.

WE MOVE QUICKLY THROUGH THE NEXT YEAR, HEARING LEIF AND BERTBERT'S MESSAGES BACK AND FOURTH TO EACH OTHER.

LEIF

Berts! That's quite a story. You know, on Earth we really don't do enough to celebrate when people fail and I think we should. There was this astrophysicist named Fred Hoyle who had a very popular theory of the universe called "steady state". He said the universe is exactly the same size and shape now as it was billions of years ago. He was kind of a dick about it, honestly. As evidence started to mount that he was wrong about his theory, he doubled down like no one has doubled down before, he wouldn't just say "sorry folks, I was wrong". Because he knew that if he was deemed a failure, he would vanish in the collective consciousness. He'd be just another guy. Eventually everyone had to just ignore him while he ranted, so his worst fear came true anyway... He did make one lasting contribution though: one time he was criticizing one of these competing theories and he said "What am I supposed to believe? That everything started with some sort of, I don't know, BIG BANG?!"... Hoisted on his own petard. Anyway, I'm on Tarvooloo? Have you been? The birds here are ridiculous...

BERTBERT

Hey Leif. Tarvooloo huh? Help me out, have you heard any gossip about ice hauler thieves? Someone in that quadrant has been highjacking ice haulers and selling the ice, but nobody knows who it is. Tell me if you hear anything...

LEIF

Ice hauler thieves, huh? Uh.. Nope, haven't heard anything, definitely let you know though...

BERTBERT

(Talking quietly to not disturb the other passengers.)

Hey Leif... I'm on a very long flight working on a very long piece and both the flight and the piece are boring. Gray water management in the Iron Quadrant, don't ask. But to take the edge off the boredom I have started a new Earth show. It's about a hospital and let me just say: Holy Fuck your medical sciences on Earth. Oh my God. What are you people even doing? When someone's heart stops and they do the electricity thing? WHAT?!? Not okay... I'd stop watching but I have to say... this George Clooney person? I'm intrigued. I would like to know more. That is the long piece I would like to write. Please give me any information you have that is George Clooney related.

LEIF

Hey there. I'm sorry that the only Earthling you know is also one of the few Earthlings that also doesn't watch television so I'm afraid I have no information on whoever that person is. Apologies. Can you help me with something? I am on a planet called, am I getting this right, Shnugens? I just witnessed some sort of ritual and... they all gathered around a very tall tree and they... well, they just started hurling live rodents at the tree. Like, tiny living creatures, they threw them at the tree. And people cheered. And now I'm disturbed, please help.

BERTBERT

(WALKING THROUGH A BUSY SPACEPORT.)

Leif, hey, I just got your message. I really feel like your inauguration into Triad life is complete because you have now experienced the joy of Shnugens. What you just witnessed was one of their most sacred rituals: Gørrpstipp. And no, that was not me choking on something, that is its actual name. The rodents, called Furshliks, by the way, are meant to race to the top of the tree and when they get there everyone cheers. Here's the thing, Leif, and this is what makes this moment so special: what you just witnessed... Was. An. Election. That's right. Whomever's Furshlik made it to the top of that tree first? They're the mayor now. It's glorious, I want every planet to do it that way. So, with the witnessing of your first Gørrpstipp, I feel like I can finally, truly say to you: welcome to The Triad.

SOUND OF AN OCEAN AND BEAUTIFUL MUSIC PLAYING.

BERTBERT (CONT'D)

...Well fuck. Eldin?

BERTBERT'S TANGLE, ELDIN, COMES TO LIFE.

ELDIN

Hi there.

BERTBERT

Was I sure that this was the right place?

ELDIN

I have no way of knowing how sure you were.

BERTBERT

I said I was sure, didn't I?

ELDIN

You did say that, but there is saying things and then there is the pesky part about said things actually being true.

BERTBERT

Are you saying I'm in denial?

ELDIN

Of course not, that would be mean. I have, however, created a word cloud using all the conversations you've had since you activated me as your personal data device. If you look at my screen you can see this word cloud.

BERTBERT

I don't want to see the word cloud.

ELDIN

Would you like to know what one of the biggest words in the word cloud is, BertBert?

BERTBERT

No.

ELDIN

Obsessive.

BERTBERT

I said I didn't want to know.

ELDIN

Oh, I think you already knew what the word was.

BERTBERT

Why is it bad to be obsessive?

ELDIN

Would you like me to list the number of times someone used the word obsessive to describe you and meant it in a good way?

BERTBERT

No.

ELDIN

Good, because there is nothing on that list.

BERTBERT

How do I adjust you sass level?

ELDIN

There is no adjusting my sass level, BertBert, you must adjust to my sass.

BERTBERT

I could change your personality any time, why do I feel like I deserve this personality?

ELDIN

Would you like me to activate gestalt psychology mode?

BERTBERT

Absolutely not.

ELDIN

You now have three assignments in your inbox from the Sigian Council.

BERTBERT

There's a third one now? What is it?

ELDIN

You're to attend the running of the Jureeks on Milinov.

BERTBERT

Are they ever going to give me a break with these puffy assignments?

ELDIN

Not with that attitude... Would you like to contact Leif?

BERTBERT

Why are you asking me that?

ELDIN

It appears to have a calming effect on you.

BERTBERT

I never talk to him, we just pass messages back and fourth.

ELDIN

Yes, you often call Leif and talk ad-nauseum into his message bin. It benefits your mood.

BERTBERT

You're tracking my moods now?

ELDIN

Am I meant to pretend that I just started doing that? Is that the game we're playing right now?

BERTBERT

Call Leif.

ELDIN  
Calling Leif.

LEIF  
(In the Tangle.)  
Hello?

BERTBERT  
... Hi.

LEIF  
Oh, hey.

BERTBERT  
We're talking in real time.

LEIF  
We are.

BERTBERT  
Are we in the same sector right now?

LEIF  
We must be.

BERTBERT  
Where are you?

LEIF  
Gilese, where are you?

BERTBERT  
Nesso, what are you doing on Gilese?

LEIF  
...Gambling.

BERTBERT  
I just got an alert for Gilese, Eldin what was the alert for Gilese?

ELDIN  
The Ted Empire is currently investigating a skimming attack on the Gilesian Gaming Compact. Millions in various currencies were extracted in a manner of hours.

BERTBERT  
Wow.

LEIF  
That explains all the commotion. Apparently they're shutting down all the casinos until they find out what happened, which means no more gambling for me.

BERTBERT

You know, you don't strike me as a gambler.

LEIF

It's just numbers.

BERTBERT

So you're still just aimlessly bopping around the Three Gs, huh?

LEIF

I have goals.

BERTBERT

Like what?

LEIF

I wanted to check out this gambling planet of yours. So I checked it out. Goal achieved.

BERTBERT

Aiming high.

LEIF

There's a whole universe out there, you want me to ignore it?

BERTBERT

No no, Leif. Go nuts.

LEIF

So what's up with you?

BERTBERT

Ugh. Well... Let me ask your advice.

LEIF

Okay.

BERTBERT

How do I catch an Australian?

LEIF

Catch one?

BERTBERT

Yes. Can you help me out with Australians? What do they want?

LEIF

What is this about?



BERTBERT

Not to bring up a sore subject but, on Trusk I was talking about the other Earthling I tracked down.

LEIF

Yes, this was our big fight.

BERTBERT

Yes.

LEIF

I thought you said he was from New Zealand.

BERTBERT

No, turns out Australia.

LEIF

It sounded like you had tracked him down already.

BERTBERT

I had tracked him to a planet. Here's the problem with planets, Leif...

LEIF

They're big?

BERTBERT

They are quite large. And finding one guy on a planet is hard, especially if he's deliberately trying to keep a low profile, which I think he is.

LEIF

And you're trying to set some sort of Australian-specific trap for him?

BERTBERT

If there was such a thing, yes. But where would I even set this Australian trap?

LEIF

That's a complicated problem.

BERTBERT

It is, and I'm sure there's no such thing as an Australian trap, I've just been looking for this guy in my off-time for a while now and I'm out of ideas... Hey, any chance you want to fly Chitty-Chitty Bang-Bang over to Nesso and help me out?

LEIF

... You know what? Sure.

BERTBERT

Oh shit, really?

LEIF

Yeah, why not. Never been to Nesso.

BERTBERT

That's amazing!

LEIF

I don't know if it's amazing.

BERTBERT

Shit. But I still have the same problem with the planet being really big.

LEIF

You don't know where I should meet you.

BERTBERT

Right.

LEIF

Can you do a search of data traffic for the whole planet?

BERTBERT

I could if I wanted to massively violate the privacy of millions of people.

LEIF

Alice, can you search for an Australian-specific word in the data stream coming out of Nesso?

ALICE

Sure. What should I search for? Weetabix? Kylie Minogue?

LEIF

"Footy."

ALICE

Searching... Several instances of "Footy" in the data stream coming from the village of Queuelue in Nesso's southern hemisphere.

LEIF

That sound like something.

BERTBERT

Footy?

LEIF

He was checking sports scores. Looks like I'm meeting you in Queuelue.

BERTBERT

Fan-fucking-tastic. Hotel is on me!

WE BEGIN TO HEAR THE SOUND OF A LARGE OUTDOOR FESTIVAL.

BERTBERT (CONT'D)

The Nancy Sinatra?

LEIF

That's right.

BERTBERT

Was she some sort of legendary explorer or something?

LEIF

She was, what we like to call, a one-hit wonder.

BERTBERT

What is that?

LEIF

A musician who makes one and only one good song, then is never heard from again.

BERTBERT

And you named your ship after her?

LEIF

She was also the daughter of one of the most famous musicians in the world. She could've stuck around if she wanted to but instead she made one good song and then walked away. I admire that. It's hard to walk away like that.

BERTBERT

I'm sensing this is a metaphor for something, Leif.

LEIF

I don't know what you mean.

BERTBERT

You walked away from Earth. I'm sure it was hard to walk away. What was your one hit?

LEIF

So what's this party all about?

BERTBERT

It's The Çerlos. It's a party that never ends, it slowly moves from town to town all around the planet.

LEIF

What's it celebrating?

BERTBERT

Itself. It a party for the sake of a party.

LEIF

That's kind of nice.

BERTBERT

Be careful. There's a rare psychological syndrome with the Çerlos. Some people don't want the party to end so they follow it to the next town. Next thing they know it's years later and they hardly remember who they were before the party started.

LEIF

Still sounds kind of nice.

BERTBERT

Do you think our Australian might be following the party?

LEIF

No. Australians travel a lot. It's an isolated place on the planet, so to combat the isolation everyone in the country gets four weeks of mandatory paid vacation so they can travel. Because of that, no matter where you go in the world you'll always find an Australian hanging out somewhere. But they always come back home.

BERTBERT

Then how do we flush him out?

LEIF

... What are you intentions with this guy?

BERTBERT

Seriously? You already came all the way here.

LEIF

Seriously.

BERTBERT

Well, see a couple of years ago this Earthling showed up in my life.

LEIF

You don't say.

BERTBERT

This Earthling was walking through the middle of Sirius Station with a pocketful of Ted Creds burning a hole in his pocket.

LEIF

That doesn't sound like any of your business.

BERTBERT

Maybe not, BUT, you know what I like on your planet? Whales. They're huge and they make fun sounds.

LEIF

Sure, me too.

BERTBERT

And if one of them was suddenly walking around on land, that is technically none of my business but I'm going to make it my business, know what I mean?

LEIF

I was a land whale?

BERTBERT

A gigantic marijuana-toting land whale, yes.

LEIF

And you failed to harpoon me.

BERTBERT

That's right. It was very frustrating for me but I shook it off and got on with my life, or so I thought. Because then, there on the horizon. Another whale.

LEIF

The Australian kind.

BERTBERT

Yes, so I'm trying my luck with this one.

LEIF

What if he doesn't want to be found?

BERTBERT

He has a right to privacy just like I have a right to look for him. Maybe he doesn't want to be found, but that's for him to decide not you or me.

LEIF

Okay. Okay, fine.

BERTBERT

So, at the risk of extending this whale analogy a bit further than I should: How do I harpoon this fucker?

LEIF

Alice, are there any venues for rent nearby?

ALICE

There are several, all they do on this planet is party.

LEIF

Rent one for tomorrow.

ALICE

Okay.

BERTBERT

You're throwing a party?

LEIF

You were joking, but there actually is a good way to catch an Australian.

BERTBERT

How?

LEIF

Barbecue.

BERTBERT

What?

LEIF

They love it. Not just them, a lot of people do. It's nostalgic. Nostalgia will get you every time. With any luck he won't be able to resist the sirens song of grilled meat in the open air.

BERTBERT

Humans are idiots.

LEIF

And yet...

THE PARTY FADES INTO THE BACKGROUND AND WE CAN HEAR NIGHT BIRDS AND THE OCEAN. A SLIDING DOOR OPENS ONTO A BALCONY.

BERTBERT

Hi.

LEIF

Of course there's a palatial balcony.

BERTBERT

We share a balcony, I promise I'm not keeping tabs on you.

LEIF

So this planet is all resorts and partying? That's it?

BERTBERT

This whole sector. Gambling on Gilese, Spas on Milinov, and resorts and parties on Nesso.

LEIF

Why would anyone ever leave this sector?

BERTBERT

They have to eventually. It's so expensive it would make you shit yourself.

LEIF

How can you afford it?

BERTBERT

They want positive press.

LEIF

Isn't that a little unethical?

BERTBERT

Sure, a little. But if I fight every battle I end up fighting none of them. Right now my battle is how to catch an Australian, I'll do the other stuff later... So what have you been up to? All I get are vague bits and pieces, what's your life like out there?

LEIF

Interesting. Have you ever seen a zoo animal be released into the wild for the first time?

BERTBERT

No. Have you?

LEIF

Yes. There's this moment when they first step out of the cage. They look up at the sky, down at the ground, out at the horizon. They seem to say, "Oh THIS is why my feet are this way. THIS is why I have these teeth. It all makes sense now." It's been like that.

BERTBERT

That's... Well, that's disturbing, Leif.

LEIF

Why? I just told you I've been released from my cage.

BERTBERT

...Have you been to the Alexanov system yet?

LEIF

No.

BERTBERT

Doesn't surprise me. There's a war going on there right now. Three inhabited planets. Alexa-Zabrina, Alexa-Caprica, and Alexa-Prime. They hate each other. The second they were able to put a ship in orbit they've been trying to destroy each other, either overtly or subtly. After a while, news about this three way war of theirs started to get ignored. It wasn't news anymore, it was always happening. And then The Teds came along. They approached the leaders of Alexa-Prime and said that they would love to bring a warp gate to their sector but the strife between the three planets made it impossible. Then they offered to sell them weapons so they could win the war. Make the system a safer place. Of course the leaders of Alexa-Prime agreed, thinking that they were finally about to run the system. What they didn't know is that The Ted Empire had that exact same conversation with all three planets. Now they're arming all three of them. So the war just keeps going, now with all three planets very well armed. That was about twenty Earth years ago, I think. A lot of people have died since then... It's an insult to common decency, what's going on there. It's an affront to what it means to be a sentient person in the universe. And what you've just told me, is that this is the place where you feel truly free. Like you've been released from your cage.

LEIF

How do you look up at the stars and only see stories like that?

BERTBERT

How do you not?

LEIF

There are a thousand stories you could tell and you pick that one.



BERTBERT

One is enough. There only needs to be one story like that to ruin all the others, and there is way more than one.

LEIF

How do you even function when you see the world like that?

BERTBERT

I function by finding out why there's an Australian where there shouldn't be one. I function by doing this, what I'm doing right now. How do you function?

LEIF

You're going to have a pretty lonely life if you judge people because they're not fighting the good fight like you are.

BERTBERT

No I won't, Leif. I'm too charming.

LEIF

Your quest to get me to care about things the way you do is going to be disappointing for you.

BERTBERT

I'm not trying to get you to care, Leif. I'm trying to get you to admit that you already do.

LEIF

You know me so well?

BERTBERT

Yes, Leif. I really do... Anyway. I'm going to get some sleep. We've got an Australian to catch tomorrow which we are apparently going to accomplish with grilled meats? Goodnight Leif.

LEIF

Goodnight.

THE SOUND OF AN OUTDOOR BARBECUE FADES IN.

DARREN

Christ is that grilled lamb? Amazing. Two of those please.

BERTBERT

Darren Delvy?

DARREN

... Yes. Have we met?

BERTBERT

My name's Bertiluna. I work for the Truth and Understanding Council on Sigius, do you understand what that means?

DARREN

Sigius. This is the planet that's always complaining about something?

BERTBERT

Yes, yes, that's us.

DARREN

How can I help?

BERTBERT

Well, I'm a curious person. So you can imagine what my curiosity does to me when I find a man on Nesso who comes from a city called Sydney in a country called Australia on a planet called Earth that currently has trouble even getting a satellite in orbit.

DARREN

... I'm from Adelaide actually, but I wouldn't expect you to know that seeing as how we're, rough estimate, 1.2 Million lightyears away from there at the moment.

BERTBERT

That's a heck of a commute.

DARREN

How'd you find me?

LEIF

You were checking the scores for Australian Rules Football.

DARREN

Hello, there. Who might you be?

LEIF

I'm Leif.

DARREN

You bear a striking resemblance to an Earthling, Leif.

LEIF

Northern California.

DARREN

Really?

BERTBERT

Darren, let me skip to the end. I'm trying to find out why The Ted Empire is identifying smart Earthlings and taking them permanently off-world. Can you shed any light on that?

LEIF

I'll skip to the end, too. You can't talk to us because it's part of your deal with The Teds.

DARREN

It's true, I'm afraid I can't.

LEIF

And let me say, I told her that would be the case but there was no way to change her mind so we had to lure you out with some Barbecue anyway.

DARREN

All this is for me, then?

BERTBERT

Surprise.

LEIF

I understand not wanting to be found. Trust me. But do understand that other people just won't give a shit what you want.

BERTBERT

He's talking about me.

DARREN

Well, I feel terrible. You've thrown me a nice little party but there's nothing I can do for you.

BERTBERT

Yes, I know... Yes, I know... But That's okay. Because I think the two of you should talk.

LEIF

What?

BERTBERT

I don't need to be there. You should talk. You're the only two Earthlings out here, at least that I know of. I'm sure you have all sorts of Earth things to talk about like, I don't know, Celine Dion?

LEIF

The whole point of this was for you to talk to him.

BERTBERT

No, it wasn't.

LEIF

What do you mean?

BERTBERT

I'm not an idiot, Leif. I knew he was going to say the same thing you did.

LEIF

Then what are we doing here?

BERTBERT

We're here so you can talk to him.

LEIF

Why?

BERTBERT

He seems like a very nice man.

DARREN

I am delightful.

LEIF

You're trying to get some kind of emotional response from me?

BERTBERT

I don't need to. It's already there.

LEIF

No, it's not.

BERTBERT

Leif, when I first met you, you took off on a ship saying you were going to see every corner of the galaxy, but what did you do?

LEIF

I-

BERTBERT

You studied, Leif. For over a year you sat in a room above a Truskan bar and you studied. Because you couldn't stand not knowing things. How is this any different?

LEIF

You're attempting to manipulate me.

BERTBERT

Saying things that are true out loud is not manipulation.

LEIF

It is when you're trying to get a particular reaction out of me.

BERTBERT

I'm not on the job, Leif. Really. If I was on the job I would be watching the running of the Jureeks on Milinov right now. Instead I'm here. With you. Because I'm your friend.

LEIF

...

BERTBERT

SO. I am going to go get a plate full of some sort of charred animal and then I am going to go to the beach, have an undetermined number of drinks and make up a bunch of excuses to send to my bosses on my home world. You boys have fun.

BERTBERT WALKS AWAY.

DARREN

Back to mine, then?

THE SOUND OF WAVES CRASHING ON A BEACH. WE HEAR A PLEASANT CHIME AND THE VOICE OF LOUISE, DARREN'S HOME AI.

LOUISE

Welcome home, Darren. The surf conditions will be ideal in 3.5 Hours.

DARREN

Thank you, Louise.

LOUISE

I see you have a guest. Can I prepare them a refreshment?

DARREN

Louise, I'm betting this young man would like a nice cup of coffee, am I right?

LEIF

That would be incredible. Why is the coffee so terrible out here?

DARREN

Turns out it's poisonous to a lot of races. Out here it's like ordering blowfish.

LEIF

Nice place.

DARREN

Quite something isn't it? Back on Earth, people would ask me why I went into rocketry and I would give them some expansive speech about humanity pushing out into the stars and manifest destiny and all that. Then I got here and realized I only got into rocketry because I wanted to go surfing on another planet. Now I have.

LEIF

BertBert was telling me. You made a fusion engine?

DARREN

In fact I did. A bit humbling to pull off a world changing invention on your home planet only to come out here and see that it's as commonplace as anything else. The fucking lawnmowers have fusion engines out here. Like to have a look?

LEIF

I would.

DARREN

Louise, bring up SCRB Mark 11 on the hologram display, would you?

LOUISE

Now displaying wireframe for SCRB Mark 11.

A HOLOGRAM HUMS IN FRONT OF LEIF.

LEIF

Well, that's... that's fantastic.

DARREN

She's a beauty.

LEIF

A lot simpler than I'd expect.

DARREN

I went through years of complicated designs, but when I went back to basics that's when the world opened up to me. I just needed to make a tiny star and put it in a box. Stars don't need tech to exist, they just need circumstance. When I cleared away the noise, it all came into being all of a sudden.

LEIF

And then The Teds showed up.

DARREN

There they were. I'd secured some land off the coast of Sumatra to build it and test it, and they were waiting for me.

LEIF

And they offered you a nice house on the beach a million light years away.

DARREN

They did.

LEIF

And that was enough for you?

DARREN

For me, it was. So... I showed you mine. Let's see yours.

LEIF

Okay. Alice, do you have that rendering from my notes?

ALICE

Do I have it? We've talked many times now about how I have everything all the time.

LEIF

Alice.

ALICE

Displaying Render 5850.

ANOTHER HOLOGRAM APPEARS ON THE PROJECTOR.

DARREN

Wait... You're fucking kidding me... A dark matter engine?

LEIF

Yeah.

DARREN

How?

LEIF

Government project. I was able to detect the dark matter at the bottom of an abandoned gold mine in South Dakota. Then I bottled it. Then I plugged it into a lamp. From there the ideas came pretty quick. This is the one that stuck with me though. An engine to travel between stars powered by everything in-between the stars.

DARREN

It's a fucking renaissance painting, man.

LEIF

Thank you... you're the first person to ever see it.

DARREN

What's the energy output?

LEIF

Never tested it, but I imagine it can go from Earth to Proxima Centauri in about a year.

DARREN

A year? 40 trillion kilometers in a year?

LEIF

As long as you don't mind your body being obliterated by g-forces on the way, yeah.

DARREN

What's it called?

LEIF

Uncle Rouge.

DARREN

Well, hello there, Uncle.

LEIF

Anyway, I came up from the mine one day and there they were waiting for me.

DARREN

What'd they offer you?

LEIF

Whatever I wanted. I didn't ask for much. Some money and a ride to the nearest Space Station. I'd figure out the rest from there.

DARREN

And have you figured it out?

LEIF

A few things. Maybe not the big picture.

DARREN

And is that why you've tracked me down? The big picture?



LEIF

I've... I've been trying to not think about it  
but...

DARREN

But people like us have a hard time not thinking.

LEIF

Yes.

DARREN

So you've been distracting yourself with all sorts  
of things, am I right?

LEIF

I have.

DARREN

You should try surfing. Has a tendency to quiet the  
mind.

LEIF

I think I'd have to surf an awful lot.

DARREN

I hear you. I mean, here we are, two men who  
could've changed their planet entirely. Unlimited  
free energy.

LEIF

They told me my invention would've been bad for the  
planet, that we weren't ready.

DARREN

They told me the same thing. You didn't buy it did  
you?

LEIF

No.

DARREN

Which leaves you and I with a pretty large  
question: Why is a technologically advanced alien  
race stopping Earth from becoming technologically  
advanced itself?

LEIF

I don't know. I was hoping you had a theory.

DARREN

... Y'know, when I first got here to Nesso I got a  
notice that there was going to be a concert on the  
beach. I thought to myself "Lovely. Great way to  
take in the culture of this new alien world.

(MORE)

DARREN (CONT'D)

I'll get to hear what they're music sounds like, that'll be a nice window into their culture." I went to the concert that night and here's what I heard:

A FEW BUTTONS ARE PUSHED ON A CONSOLE AND WE BEGIN TO HEAR SARABANDE VERSION 1 BY HANDEL.

DARREN (CONT'D)

It's Handel. It's the fucking Sarabande. At first I thought they were doing it to honor my arrival. I asked my waiter "Is this all for me? Is this to welcome the Earthling to the alien planet?" And my waiter assured me: "Oh no. We always offer the finest Earth music here on Nesso. Our customers demand it."

LEIF

Demand it?

DARREN

Out there in your travels, how often does someone speak your language?

LEIF

All the time, because-

DARREN

Because they love our television. We're one of the least advanced sentient races in three galaxies but people can't stop watching our fucking movies. You don't think that odd?

LEIF

I think it's bizarre.

DARREN

And what if that's it?

LEIF

They keep Earth in the relative stone age because they want to keep liking what we create?

DARREN

They love our movies, our music, our television, but then when we take steps to be more like them, what happens?

LEIF

They cut us off at the knees.

DARREN

They do. They must.

LEIF

I'm sure we could be a technologically advanced race and also make great music.

DARREN

But think of our generous benefactors. The glorious Ted Empire. Technologically advanced, a dominating force across three galaxies... But everybody fucking hates them. They've got no competition. But let's say Earth was allowed to become an advanced race. My fusion engine, your dark matter, technologies that eliminated scarcity. In a generation you'd have a technologically advanced society just like The Teds but they've got something The Teds don't, and can't, have.

LEIF

Cultural dominance.

DARREN

Precisely. The only thing keeping Earth from being a true challenge to their glorious Empire is the fact that we are currently a bunch of fucking Cro-magnons. And they need to keep us that way.

LEIF

Then why did you agree to it?

DARREN

Why did you?

LEIF

You first.

DARREN

... I don't know. Fear, I think.

LEIF

Fear?

DARREN

Of course. In both of our home countries you can't walk down the street without being haunted by ghosts. Half your states are named after Native Americans. Your cars, Jeep Cherokee, Ford Thunderbird, etcetera. Apache Helicopters. You've got an American Football team called the Redskins for Christ's sake. And for us it's the same. Streets and parks named after Aboriginal Australians... When a technological empire rolls up on the shores of indigenous people, it never goes well, my friend. If Earth knowingly joined an intergalactic community, I imagine it'd go the same way.

(MORE)

DARREN (CONT'D)

In hardly any time at all we'd just be street names and parks. A memory. Maybe I thought we'd be better off in the dark.

LEIF

Things have to move forward though.

DARREN

Move forward towards what exactly?... I don't know how much water that reasoning holds but that's what I tell myself at least... So what are your reasons?

LEIF

... I just wanted out... Always did. I wanted out of Humboldt County, I wanted out of college, I made something truly revolutionary and I wanted out of that too. I wish I had some deeper philosophy about it but... Everywhere I went I felt trapped.

DARREN

Something tells me that neither of our explanations are going to be very satisfying to your friend from Sigius.

LEIF

I still don't understand why The Teds would go through all this trouble just because people like to watch Earth television.

DARREN

People will endure all manner of things as long as there's something good on television at the end of the day, Leif. Stories are more powerful than we want them to be. Every sentient being out there in the stars is telling themselves a story everyday. They get up in the morning and they begin to tell the story of themselves to themselves. You've never seen someone so in distress as when they've lost the plot to their own story. They'll go to war to get it back. Burn cities, enslave millions, all to keep the story going. There's all sorts of destructive powers out there but none of them so powerful as the need for a good narrative. Look at you: restless youth, answering to no one. How often do you tell yourself that story every day?

LEIF

...

DARREN

I've been thinking about progress a lot since I came out here. That's what we focus on, right? Scientists want to push the world forward, we want progress.

(MORE)

DARREN (CONT'D)

I left Earth and I saw all these things that I considered progress: fusion, stable wormholes, advanced AI. But I look deeper and what do I see? Rapacious monopolies, racism, religious fanaticism, slavery rebranded. Turns out what I thought was progress was just window dressing. A nice paint job on the same old house. What is progress then if it's not all this fancy tech I devoted my life to? And I think it goes back to those stories we tell ourselves. True progress is finally being able to let go of the bullshit we tell ourselves. Show me a race that's capable of that and I'll show you real progress. Until then... I surf... Waves are coming in at beginner level right now. I've got an extra board. How about a surfing lesson, young man?

WE SHIFT BACK TO THE NEVER ENDING PARTY.

VERGE

Excuse me, is this seat taken?

BERTBERT

No, go ahead.

VERGE

Thanks.

BERTBERT

Quite a party, huh?

VERGE

Really is. Is it always like this?

BERTBERT

It's the Çærlø, it's a party that travels the whole planet.

VERGE

Must be nice.

BERTBERT

I know, right?

VERGE

I'm Verge.

BERTBERT

BertBert.

VERGE

You here on an assignment?

BERTBERT

What?

VERGE

Sorry, I see a Sigian and I always assume they're on an assignment.

BERTBERT

We take vacations sometimes... I've heard.

VERGE

Let me ask you a question: How do Sigians feel about interplanetary relations?

BERTBERT

Oh, uh, well we're okay with it.

VERGE

Just "Ok"?

BERTBERT

I mean, I'm sure you've heard the stories, there are some Sigians who are anti-interplanetary-funny-business but they're a vocal minority.

VERGE

Well in that case can I buy you a drink?

BERTBERT

Oh.

VERGE

Hey, Baby.

LEIF

Verge?

VERGE

Look at you, going to a leisure planet without me.

LEIF

What are you doing here?

BERTBERT

You two know each other?

VERGE

I've been calling you.

BERTBERT

You're wet.

LEIF

I went surfing.

BERTBERT

You did?

LEIF  
I saw your message, I haven't checked it yet.

VERGE  
You should check it, it's important.

BERTBERT  
How do you know each other?

VERGE  
We're business partners.

LEIF  
No we're not.

BERTBERT  
You're running a business now?

LEIF  
Verge, this is BertBert.

VERGE  
We've met, I was just about to buy her a drink.

LEIF  
What did the message say?

VERGE  
That we're fucked and our lives are in danger.

BERTBERT  
...Excuse me?

LEIF  
What are you talking about?

VERGE  
Our genius plan to skim the casinos on Gilese has backfired in such a monumental way that it's almost poetry.

BERTBERT  
What?!

LEIF  
How?

BERTBERT  
That was you?

VERGE  
Yes.

BERTBERT

What is going on?

VERGE

Casinos are funny. They're owned by the Gilesian Gaming Compact but they're not REALLY owned by the Gilesian Gaming Compact, you know what I mean?

BERTBERT

Wait. Ice hauler thieves on Tarvooloo?

VERGE

Yeah, that was us too.

BERTBERT

What?!

LEIF

Who are they actually owned by?

BERTBERT

Please tell me you have not started building a criminal empire, Leif.

VERGE

Empire's a strong word. Cottage Industry, maybe? It's just me, Leif, and Dex.

BERTBERT

Dex? You have lured that sweet Truskan into a life of crime?

VERGE

I mean, he's a member of a shipping union, he was already halfway there.

BERTBERT

This is what you've been doing? You've got three galaxies to play around in and you choose crime?

VERGE

What did you want him to do, get a job?

BERTBERT

Yes!

LEIF

Who are the casinos actually owned by?

VERGE

... Låfftrax.

BERTBERT

... Oh fuck.



VERGE

Yeah.

BERTBERT

No.

VERGE

Oh, yes.

BERTBERT

This is so bad.

LEIF

Who is Låfftrax?

VERGE

Isn't it adorable when he asks questions like that?

LEIF

Verge.

BERTBERT

The most dangerous criminal in the fucking Triad,  
Leif.

LEIF

Oh.

BERTBERT

And you just ripped them off?

VERGE

We did.

BERTBERT

How much?

VERGE

Wow. SO much money.

BERTBERT

No!

LEIF

What are we supposed to do now?

VERGE

You know how we split up after every job? We're  
going to need to make that a little longer this  
time.

BERTBERT

God, you even have a process? How many jobs have  
you pulled?

LEIF

What are you doing here, then?

VERGE

... I wanted to see you.

BERTBERT

Okay... Okay... Um... Okay... I have SO many things I'm going to yell at you. I'm making a list in my head... Okay... You both have to come with me.

VERGE

Not doing that.

LEIF

Why?

BERTBERT

I'm going to register you both as confidential sources of mine. That will give you some protection on Sigius, we're going to Sigius. Go pack your things. Actually, don't go pack your things we're going straight to the nearest port, let's go.

LEIF

I'm your source now?

BERTBERT

No. Now you're an idiot, I'm just treating you like a source. Let's go!

VERGE

I'm not going to Sigius.

BERTBERT

You're both going to be killed. I'm surprised you're not dead already. Goddamnit, Leif!

VERGE

I've already got a plan for myself, I'm not going to Sigius.

BERTBERT

Why?

VERGE

Because I'm a Vapian, Honey. I'd rather be caught dead. Leif, you should go, though. It's not a bad plan.

LEIF

Berts, can you give us a minute please?

BERTBERT

Literally one minute, Leif.

LEIF

... So, is this Låfftrax really that bad?

VERGE

So, so bad. Sorry. Låfftrax's territory has been growing really fast but I didn't know it was growing this fast. I should've known.

LEIF

If Sigius is the safest place, you should come with us.

VERGE

There are about 5 billion nosey Sigians on Sigius who will want to know what a Vapian is doing there. I'm not doing it.

LEIF

If we're in this much danger I don't think now's the time to be your usual stubborn self.

VERGE

Don't worry about me. You go with her. I'm going to take Nancy. There's an asteroid belt in the middle of nowhere, outside of a mining colony. I'm going to park there and act like a rock for a while.

LEIF

What about Dex?

VERGE

The shipping union on Trusk is protecting him, he'll be fine.

LEIF

How will I find you?

VERGE

I'll find you.

LEIF

... I'm going to miss you.

VERGE

You fucking better fucking miss me...

LEIF

... I don't know what to say.

VERGE

What's our rule? When you don't know what to say,  
say exactly what's on your mind.

LEIF

... I'm having a great time.

VERGE

Seriously?

LEIF

Yes.

VERGE

You're a fucking psychopath.

LEIF

I know.

VERGE

I love you.

LEIF

... I love you too.

VERGE

Go.

LEIF

Okay...

VERGE WALKS OFF.

LEIF (CONT'D)

So... I hear Sigius is lovely this time of year.

BERTBERT

Moron.

BERTBERT WALKS OFF.

LEIF

This'll be a fun trip.

**THE END.**